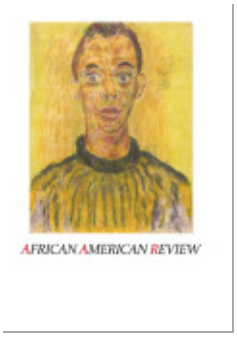
Tribute to the Martyrs

Eddie Chambers



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environs were in the small towns of Lancashire, where "by his own industry and talent he got together as fine a stud of horses and ponies as any in England" (Turner 22). He was "the loftiest jumper in England . . . leaping over a post chaise placed lengthwise with a pair of horses in the shafts and through a military drum at the same time" (21). The dangers of being asked to play the minstrel were obvious in the mid-nineteenth century, when imperial racialist ideas infected popular cultural forms like the musical theater and circus culture. It is a testament to Fanque that he resisted or manipulated racial stereotypes in his favor to create an enormously successful career. Fanque's fame is assured by the backstory to the lyrics of the Beatles song "For the Benefit of Mr. Kite" from *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*, which was based on an antique circus poster highlighting his famed circus. John Lennon is photographed pointing at the poster, illustrating a carnivalesque, sepia-tinged Ye Olde England. For Lennon, the name Pablo Fanque is a mere exoticism, but from our perspective he complicates Anglocentric and nostalgic readings of British history, illustrating a black presence right at the heart of vernacular culture in the nation. As a black pioneer, he has only recently been rediscovered, especially in Leeds, where his grave has become the focus of black history walks and memorialization. Joe Williams has written and performed a play, *The Fishes of Isis* (2012), about his remarkable life. Of our black heroes, he is the only one born in Britain: a testament to the routed nature of so many diasporic Africans who decided to settle in Britain in this period.

This list of black British heroes, which does not include important black British figures such as William Cuffay (1788-1870); the black Chartist, Ignatius Sancho (1729-1780), the grocer. composer of music, and writer of literary letters who famously sat for Thomas Gainsborough in 1768; or Ottobah Cugoano (b. 1757), whose radical slave narrative was published before Equiano's in 1787, shows the potential utility of an approach like Bernier's for contemplating black heroism in other geographies. Her approach, with its insistence on black Atlantic valences, agency, and self-fashioning, and its focus on a range of response across chronologies, leads to complex and intriguing new perspectives on these seminal figures. Reflecting on Debra Priestly's wonderful installation "Strange Fruit 2" (2001), that uses images on canning jars to narrate African American history, Bernier describes "multifaceted, ambiguous, and contradictory reimagings to ensure that the signifying possibilities of black heroism are constantly 'kept open' " (355). Bernier's valuable monograph performs similar wonders.

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Characters of Blood brings to life, in extraordinary, gruesome, and terrible detail the lives and deaths of African American martyrs, and the ways in which these individuals have been chronicled, and in effect resurrected, by a range of extraordinary artists. The book demonstrates and animates many critical considerations, among them, the ways in which this hitherto underexamined strand of African American art compares and contrasts with equivalent visual histories elsewhere in the African diaspora. The body of work Bernier discusses is of course unique, reflecting as it does not only four centuries of black struggle on what came to be American soil, but also a concurrent history of cogent artistic practices among those we have come to know as African American artists. In contrast, although Africans have occupied, and indeed, been engaged in bloody struggle in Caribbean

lands for an equivalent period of time, the *memorializing*, the *documenting*, of that struggle by Caribbean artists has taken place over a relatively brief period. Elsewhere, one might also suggest that the black struggle on British soil has a history that stretches back to Elizabethan times and beyond, though relatively little of that struggle has been chronicled by the country's black artists.

The ways in which black heroism has been documented in the African diaspora bears particular scrutiny. While commemoration of individual heroes may exist on a relatively modest scale, compared to the output of African American artists as so ably demonstrated by Bernier, black British artists in particular have produced no end of engaging, dynamic work that seeks to memorialize the lives, struggles, and deaths of the countless black lives lost during the centuries of slavery. In some ways, this speaks to the importance of acknowledging the often unnamed or unknown individuals with whom these artists share so much history. But the relative paucity of commemorations of individual black heroes in wider African diasporic art also points to a relatively modest tally of named and identifiable black British figures of *resistance* and the ways in which these individuals have yet to achieve any sort of genuinely canonical status, the sort of status that might lead to their being the subjects of singular art works in the vein of those brought to us by Bernier.

When a new generation of black artists emerged in Britain in the early 1980s, they took as their heroes, and visualized accordingly, such African American figures as George Jackson, Huey Newton, Martin Luther King, Sojourner Truth, Malcolm X, and so on. It was iconic figures such as these who loomed large in the consciousness of artists such as Marlene Smith, Donald Rodney, and Keith Piper. In a great many instances, the artistic embrace of these recognizable individuals reflected the Pan-African sensibilities of the Black Arts Movement, with its dynamic agenda of celebrating struggle and memorializing resistance. One particular piece of work, by Piper, merits considerable scrutiny. With his compelling and influential book, *Revolutionary Suicide*, Huey P. Newton had emerged as a charming, charismatic, tragic hero/anti-hero of the Black Power era, and Piper sought to memorialize Newton in an astonishing work of 1982. Within the work, Piper stretched untreated canvas over a fairly large frame. He then took a piece of cardboard of stenciled lettering with the words "Black Panther Party for Self Defence" [*sic*] and, using an aerosol can of red paint, repeatedly stenciled the words across the canvas in dramatic fashion.[2] In the middle of the canvas Piper adhered a photocopy of Newton, behind prison bars, flicking a V sign. Not the inwardly turned V sign historically beloved of peace activists, but the altogether different, more assertive, more uncompromising outwardly turned V sign, with its decidedly different readings, more akin to today's gesture of a single, raised, middle finger. Across one of Newton's eyes and part of his forehead and hair, Piper had painted, in translucent red ink, a single five-pointed star, symbolizing Newton's socialist credentials and the ways in which socialist thought was such a dramatic underpinning of Black Panther activism. Approximately A4 in dimension, the photocopy of Newton's portrait was completed with a salvaged thin picture frame, thereby emphasizing the status of this troubled Black Power revolutionary. Though Newton was still alive at the time that Piper made the work, it nevertheless functioned as a memorial to both a fallen revolutionary and a fallen revolutionary movement. Piper had layered the mixed media work with a particularly pithy, succinct encapsulation of the rise and fall of one of America's most intriguing revolutionary movements of modern times: "A BROTHER ONCE DECLARED WAR ON A CORRUPT SOCIETY. THE CORRUPT SOCIETY WON BECAUSE NO-ONE BELIEVED IT WOULDN'T." Thus, Piper alluded, in typically dramatic fashion, not only to the rise and fall of the Black Panther Party, but also gave his audiences a compelling narrative with which to understand the reasons for the group's existence, and a tragic yet powerful summary of the reasons for its failure, which devastatingly included societal complicity.

Here, writ large within this piece, was the manifestation of Ron Karenga's diktat that "Black art must expose the enemy, praise the people and support the revolution" (33-34). In memorializing Newton, Piper was not only drawing renewed attention to a rapidly fading movement, but was simultaneously urging remembrance of one of its original thinkers and activists. But what made Piper's Huey P. Newton piece all the more astonishing was the anti-art school thesis embedded within it. At the time of the work's making, Piper was a fine arts student at Trent Polytechnic, Nottingham. Like other art schools across the country, the dominant ethos at the time was the teaching of formal aspects of fine art—technical abilities of painting and drawing, the rules of perspective, form, line, color, still life, and model drawing, and so on. This approach was deemed to be most appropriate to equip students for the tasks of being artists and going on to make work, having mastered the necessary and prerequisite skills. Furthermore, this was an approach that ensured that work with pronounced social and political agendas was kept far from the art school studio. Students were taught how to stretch canvases, prepare the canvases for painting, mix paints, and so on. No consideration was given to the best ways in which exigent societal messages might be communicated within a work. In effect, Piper drove a coach and horses through this dominant ethos, breezily disregarding it in a declared preference for making work that dynamically challenged the prescribed role of the art student as socially disengaged individual. In the making of this work, Piper headed to the art school store for his canvas and nothing more. His lettering stencils he created himself, and instead of oils or acrylics, he utilized a can of aerosol paint, as used by motor garages and graffiti artists alike. Aerosol can, stencil, and photocopy—these were the tools Piper used to create his singular homage to Huey P. Newton.

Piper's determined and studious challenge to the dominant art school ethos and all it represented also manifested itself in another important work of his of this period. Before the Newton memorialization, Piper had sought to memorialize a distinct group of fallen victims who had come to be regarded as martyrs. Nineteen eighty-one was the year of a traumatic event that became known in certain quarters as the New Cross Massacre, in which thirteen black youngsters attending an evening birthday party were killed in a suspicious house fire in the New Cross district of southeast London.[3] The cause of the fire was unknown, though among black people themselves, there were profound suspicions that the fire pointed to the work of racist arsonists, particularly as such arson attacks on the homes of black and Asian people were at the time not uncommon. Such attacks often took the form of gasoline or other accelerants being poured through a letterbox and lit, effectively trapping and incinerating the property's hapless occupants. It should also be remembered that the music and the comings and goings of Afro-Caribbean house parties had long been a source of friction among white neighbors, resentful of thumping bass lines and the sight of black people having a good time. In more than a few instances, neighbors' resentment had resulted in violence and property damage, often in the form of arson. In this context, those who believed the victims died as a consequence of such actions had more than a little circumstantial evidence on their side.

It was, though, the profound and quite studious indifference of the state that most offended black Britain, an indifference shown both by the mainstream news media and by senior religious or political figures. Even Queen Elizabeth had no declaration of condolences for the bereaved, as was customary in deaths on this scale. Furthermore, there existed the disturbing perception that any efforts made by the police to properly determine the cause of the fire, or to apprehend possible suspects, were lackluster in the extreme. The black reaction to such comprehensive apathy was later expressed in song by Johnny Osbourne in his "13 Dead (Nothing Said)."[4] The fire was a horrific incident that galvanized the black community; it acutely increased its sense of identity and purpose, and led to a sense that these thirteen

children had been executed, first at the hands of persons unknown, and then by the state that appeared to condone their murders.

And so it was that Piper set about making his 1981 mixed media piece, *13 Killed*, in which he collaged a newspaper report of the tragedy, overlaying image and text on a powerful background that consisted of a re-creation of wallpaper and baseboard reminiscent of a typical West Indian living room, though visibly burned and charred.[5] Using found materials in such a strikingly original and emotive way, Piper gave form to black tragedy, grief, and outrage. This was a work of the most profound empathy, in which Piper paid homage to lives lived and lives lost. Using plain household postcards, Piper penned messages to each of the fire's victims, naming them all and attaching portraits of them to each message. This effectively restored to each victim a humanity and an individuality that was brutally taken, not only by the fire itself but also by the state's subsequent aloofness. Piper's wordsmithing skills were engaged to answer the tragedy that occurred on what would have been Yvonne Ruddock's sixteenth birthday: "SEND THIS ONE BACK TO THE PEOPLE! SISTER YVONNE SURVIVED 15 YEARS WITH US IN BABYLON. ON THE DAWN OF HER 16TH YEAR BABYLON SNUFFED HER OUT. SEND THIS ONE BACK TO THE PEOPLE + LET THEM DEMAND AN ANSWER!" Similar messages were penned for the other victims, each one identified by name and age, thereby emphasizing their individual humanity: Humphrey Brown, 18; Peter Campbell, 18; Steve Collins, 17; Patrick Cummings, 16; Gerry Francis, 17; Andrew Gooding, 14; Lloyd Richard Hall, 20; Patricia Denise Johnston, 15; Rosalind Henry, 16; Glenton Powell, 15; Paul Ruddock, 22; and Owen Thompson, 16. This infamy of January 1981 is an episode that today, more than thirty years on, is an obscure chapter in British history. Were it not for black parents and neighbors who agitated for both action and answers, or Johnny Osbourne, or Piper, the New Cross Massacre would be all the more obscure. Like his monument to Huey P. Newton, Piper's *13 Killed* reflected a profound and formidable anti-art-school ethos. With its salvaged aesthetics, its frugality of cost and manufacture, and its spare but emotive messages, Piper memorialized this group of young black victims.

Black British artists such as Piper, Rodney, Smith, and Lubaina Himid all developed practices that continuously sought to rescue everyday black people and heroic black historical figures alike, from an ever-threatening obscurity. Typical in this regard was Himid's 1987 work, *Scenes from the Life of Toussaint L'Ouverture* (watercolor and pencil on paper, fifteen sheets). In this series, Himid depicts assorted scenes from the life and legend of Toussaint Louverture. On one of her sheets, beneath stylized renderings of the warrior statesman, Himid offers the following sentences: "Toussaint was known as The Centaur of the Savannahs he rode 125 miles a day. He could jump on a horse at full speed and was still a fine rider at 60." Black British artists have a formidable history of demonstrating not only an awareness, but also a profound interconnectedness with all manner of history that contributes to the building of a complex, culturally and politically resilient African diasporic identity. Exploring the work to which this identity has given rise could very well be a critical addendum to *Characters of Blood*.

Notes

1. Taken from the Steel Pulse (English reggae group) album titled *Tribute to the Martyrs* (Mango Records, 1979).

2. Black Panther Party for Self-Defense (with U. S. spelling) was the original name of the Black Panther Party.

3. For a discussion of the tragedy, see "The Deptford Fire, Accident or Arson?" *Unsolved* 42 (1984): 829-48.

4. Johnny Osbourne, *13 Dead (Nothing Said),* prod. Aswad and Mickey Cambell (Simba Productions, 1981), reggae LP.

5. For a look at the particular aesthetics of the West Indian living room, see Michael McMillan, *The Front Room: Migrant Aesthetics in the Home* (London: Black Dog, 2009).